

CHAPTER I

May 10 — Paris

At 5:31 p.m., Elena stepped off at Odéon and, for the first time all day, felt she had done something exactly the way she wanted. Not the fastest way. Not the way someone had recommended. Not the way it had been arranged for her. Her way. The day before, Maya had sent her the driver's name, the make of the car, and the exact place he would be waiting after she landed. Elena had replied from Kennedy. I'm taking the Métro. Two minutes later, Maya had answered:

Of course you are.

There was no question in it, no attempt to change her mind. Elena appreciated that about Maya. Fourteen months ago, she would have looked for something more in the sentence. Now she was trying not to. The platform for Line 10 was warmer than the street above. The air held the metallic smell of brakes, damp wool from coats, and the sweet scent of something someone had brought down in a paper bakery bag. Elena wedged her suitcase between her legs and looked at the board. Two minutes. She remembered Paris differently. But maybe you never really remembered a city. You remembered yourself in it. The last time she had been here, she was twenty-nine and certain that everything important in her life was still ahead of her. She had waited nearly an hour for Adrian at the airport because his luggage had been sent to Milan. They had laughed about it. Drunk wine before lunch. Pretended for two days that they didn't own phones.

Elena looked away from the tunnel. The train arrived on a pressure wave of warm air. There were empty seats, but she stayed by the doors, bracing the suitcase with one knee. In the glass opposite, her reflection mixed with advertisements and the moving lights of the

tunnel. Dark coat. Hair pulled back. A face the overnight flight had stripped of any last attempt to look rested. Her phone vibrated. Maya. Don't get off at Mabillon. Elena frowned. I wasn't planning to. Three dots appeared immediately. When the train leaves Mabillon, look to the right. Why?

No answer came. At Mabillon, the doors opened into a narrow stream of people. An older man with two baguettes tucked under one arm stepped in beside Elena and pushed her closer to the window. The doors beeped. The train moved. Elena looked right. At first there was only the black tunnel wall. Cables. Dust. Brief white flashes skimming across the glass like distant lightning. Then, for a moment, the space opened up.

A station.

Dark, empty, cut off from the movement around it. White tiles buried beneath decades of grime. The edge of a platform. An old staircase climbing into darkness. Part of a name on the wall that her eyes caught before she consciously managed to read it.

CROIX-ROUGE.

It lasted maybe three seconds. Then another tunnel swallowed it. Elena stayed turned toward the rear of the car, though there was nothing left to see. Her phone vibrated. Did you see it? Yes. And? It exists. Maya answered almost at once.

That's enough for now.

A minute later, the train slowed at Sèvres-Babylone. Maya was waiting beyond the turnstiles, beige trench coat open, hair pinned low at the nape of her neck. A phone in one hand, a paper bakery bag in the other. When she saw Elena, she smiled and put the phone away. They hugged briefly. No sentimentality, no caution of the kind Elena had learned to recognize in recent weeks even before someone touched her.

"Have you eaten?"

"On the plane."

Maya gave her a look that assessed the answer without requiring comment, then handed her the paper bag. Inside was a croissant, still slightly warm. They came out onto Boulevard Raspail. The sidewalks gleamed after the rain, and Paris looked richer in color than it did dry. The beige stone facades had darkened. The trees along the boulevard were thick with leaves, almost summer-heavy. The foliage had already lost its sharp spring green, though the air was still cool. Cars cut

through shallow water along the curbs while bicycles, scooters, and pedestrians threaded between them with the apparent conviction that traffic would yield because it had no choice.

Elena broke off one corner of the croissant. Daylight still lingered above the roofs. They walked for a while without speaking, and Elena was grateful for it. Maya matched her pace to the suitcase and helped lift it over the curb. At the intersection by Rue de Sèvres, they stopped at a red light. Across the street, the windows of a café came on, and the smell of butter and coffee drifted toward them through the open door.

“We were supposed to have more time,” Maya said.

Elena watched the headlights move across the wet asphalt.

“We’ll deal with it.”

That was all. Closing was on the twenty-ninth. Twenty days. She had originally been meant to arrive ten days earlier. Maya didn’t start listing everything they had to get through. Neither did Elena. They both knew. When the light changed, they crossed onto Rue de Sèvres. The street was narrower than Boulevard Raspail but more alive. Shop windows, small stores, a pharmacy with a blinking green cross, restaurants setting their tables for dinner. Someone was watering flowers from an open second-floor window. A few buildings farther on, a woman stood outside an entrance smoking with a phone pressed to her ear.

Paris was happening around Elena without caring that she was there. There was something pleasant about that. In New York, for the past few weeks, every room she entered seemed to know something about her already. Here, no one knew anything. Maya pointed to a building a few dozen yards ahead. Pale stucco, tall windows, narrow balconies with black iron railings.

“There.”

Elena looked up.

“Which floor?”

“Third.”

“Elevator?”

Maya looked at her. Elena understood.

“Of course.”

“There is one.”

“Then why are you looking at me like there isn’t?”

“You’ll see.”

The vestibule smelled of waxed old wood and damp stone. Beyond a pair of doors, a broad staircase with a dark banister climbed upward, and beside it sat a tiny elevator barely large enough for two people and a suitcase. Maya placed two brass keys and a smaller one in Elena's palm.

"The owner spends most of the year outside Paris. The apartment is furnished. The kitchen works. So does the internet. At least it did yesterday."

Elena took the keys.

"And if it doesn't?"

"You'll get a more authentic French experience."

The elevator stopped on the third floor with a soft jolt. The apartment was larger than Elena had expected. Not large, exactly, but long and bright, with high ceilings and parquet floors that creaked faintly under every step. The living room had two tall windows overlooking Rue de Sèvres. Evening light fractured through the wet glass. A vase of white tulips stood on the table. Elena stopped.

"You?"

Maya took off her coat.

"No. The Archangel Gabriel."

Elena raised an eyebrow.

"Me."

Elena set her handbag on a chair. From the window she could see the upper half of the street. Red taillights. People beneath umbrellas. Across the way, a lamp came on in an apartment and revealed a wall-to-wall bookcase. Thirty days. That had been the original plan. The apartment had been booked for a period whose first ten days had already passed without her. Maya came to the window but stayed a step behind.

"Tomorrow we go down."

Elena turned.

"Into the station?"

"Yes."

"And today?"

"Nothing today."

"I don't believe you."

Maya smiled faintly.

"Today you eat and sleep."

Elena ran her fingers along the cold window frame.

"The project still works?"

"Yes."

"And that's why I'm here."

"Yes."

That was one of the most irritating things about Maya. She could answer a question exactly without giving you anything you actually wanted from it. Elena looked back at the street.

"Why did you want me to see Croix-Rouge from the train?"

"Because that's how Paris sees it."

Elena pictured the empty platform.

"Three seconds."

"If that."

Maya stepped closer to the window.

"I wanted you to see it as it is first. Before we show you what we want to make of it."

Maya showed her through the rest of the apartment. The bedroom faced a quiet courtyard where green dusk pooled between the buildings. The kitchen was small but had everything she needed. A bottle of water, wine, and a few basic groceries were waiting on the counter. Elena opened the refrigerator.

"Gabriel too?"

"Obviously," Maya said with a laugh.

Back in the living room, Maya picked up her coat. At the door, she stopped.

"Tomorrow morning at nine."

But she didn't move. The silence changed. Elena knew that silence now.

"Do you want to talk about Adrian?"

Elena looked out the window at Rue de Sèvres.

"No."

Maya nodded.

"Okay."

And that was the end of it. Her hand was already on the door handle when she added:

"Tomorrow I'll introduce you to Elias."

Elena turned toward her. Maya opened the door.

"Tonight you can still pretend you're on vacation."

A moment later Elena heard only Maya's footsteps in the hall, followed by the distant growl of the old elevator. She stayed by the

window. The street lamps had come on, and the wet asphalt beneath them looked almost black. People passed below her windows carrying bags, umbrellas, bicycles, bouquets wrapped in paper. Across the street, someone opened the door of a restaurant and yellow light spilled onto the sidewalk. Elena took out her phone. Four unread messages. All of them belonged to New York. She opened none of them. Instead, she pulled up Maya's message from the Métro again. Did you see it?

She pictured three seconds of darkness, the abandoned platform, the white tiles vanishing behind glass. It existed.

For now, that really was enough.